SPELLBOUND
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Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29
Luke 19:28–40, 45–48

"All the people were spellbound by what they heard."
Luke 19:48 (NRSV)

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It often takes distance to discern the hand of God in the patterns of the world.
The scriptural account of Holy Week challenges us to find our places next to these people,
there on the edge of things, and to take in, with them, all of the events in this story,
as the powers and principalities deliver the worst they can summon upon the cross
of Jesus Christ. The challenge is to stand far enough away from the canvas to overcome the numbing familiarity that attends our knowing this story, backward and forward. The challenge is to see it—in both its terror and redemption—
as if for the first time, and then observe that at the end of it all, God is still in charge.
God's ongoing drama with history and human life is still unfolding.
Hallelujah.

Theodore J. Wardlaw
"At a Distance," *The Christian Century*, 20 March 2007

Startle us, O God, with your truth, your love, your passion for the world.
Startle us again with the story of a brave young man, your son, coming to the city.
Startle us with the strength and courage and power of his coming,
and as with those who were there, who waved branches and sang hosanna,
leave us spellbound.
Amen.

At the beginning of his classic novel *Love in the Ruins*, Walker Percy says that we are a "Christ haunted" culture (Marcus Borg, *Jesus*, p.3).

“Christ haunted”—and nothing haunts me, inspires me, compels me, drives me as deep into my own heart and soul as what he did on the occasion this day commemorates, Palm Sunday. It is an occasion of considerable ambiguity. Is it a triumph or a tragedy? On the one hand there is the palm waving, joyfully shouting crowd, the children and their loud hosannas, the reenactment of which, as our children process in and fill the chancel, is one of the high and holy moments around here—and an opportunity for me to show off the newest grandchild. On the morning I was preparing this sermon, my oldest daughter called. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m writing my Palm Sunday sermon,” I answered.

“Oh,” she said. “Why don’t you just say ‘You’ve heard this so many times before, let me tell you about my new granddaughter.’” So Eliza Sue, in San Diego, is healthy and beautiful.

On the one hand, there is the triumph, the joyful crowd, the children. On the other hand, there are the events set in motion by what Jesus did this day that would lead directly to his execution five days later.

Triumph or tragedy? Mostly we go for the triumph. We prefer the “Let’s have a parade” theory of Palm Sunday, Peter Gomes says, remembering from his childhood celebrations such as we have had. Gomes thinks it comes from a “discreet form” of mainline Protestantism that is embarrassed by the cross and would rather not deal with all the nasty, political, conspiratorial, brutal results of what Jesus did on Palm Sunday. So we turn it into a dress rehearsal for Easter.

The story begins earlier and miles away, in Galilee, where Jesus of Nazareth lived and for three years taught in the synagogues in the fishing villages around the lake and on the hillsides and on the roads. He had gathered followers, disciples, men and women who accompanied him, and as his reputation as a gifted rabbi and healer grew, so did the concern of religious and political authorities all the way down to the capital city of Jerusalem. Delegations were sent from Jerusalem to investigate: they challenged him, argued, baited him. He was safe in Galilee, however, because he was with his own people—rural, small-town people mostly, poor people mostly, people who would not have been much impressed with these delegations of educated, sophisticated, urbane, experts from the big city, having come all the way up here to harass and implicate one of their own.

But now he has decided to go to them, to Jerusalem. His closest friends advise him not to do it. It’s a big mistake. Why in the world would you want to go to the capital city where, under the wary, watchful eyes of the occupying Romans, a peasant from Galilee could get in a lot of trouble? When he rejected their advice and “set his face toward Jerusalem,” they

followed, reluctantly, frightened about what might happen to him—to them, for that matter.

On the road to Jerusalem, they joined large crowds of people, all walking in the same direction, for the same reason. It was the Passover, the central celebration of the year for the Jewish people, a celebration actually of their liberation from enslavement in Egypt centuries before. It was a time of religious fervor and passionate patriotism. Every Jew was supposed to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem at least once. It all made the occupying Romans so nervous that the Roman governor, a man by the name of Pontius Pilate, moved his headquarters from Caesarea by the sea to the capital city and brought along a troop of elite Roman soldiers to keep order and to deal with any dangerous outbursts of enthusiasm that might escalate into an insurrection.

It was a festive, happy throng of pilgrims on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem: families, excited children, parents, the elders perhaps making their first—and last—pilgrimage. Word spread up and down and through the crowd that Jesus was coming too, Jesus and his followers: Peter and John and Andrew, the Marys and his mother.

It was a walk of several days, and near the end, when they arrived at the small town of Bethany, a few miles outside Jerusalem, Jesus began to act differently, strangely. He told two of his friends to bring a donkey, specifically a colt, and although no one had ever seen him ride a donkey before (there was no need: he was a strong young man, used to walking everywhere), he allowed them to set him on it, and they resumed the journey. But now— now when the others on the road saw it, saw him bumping along on the back of that little donkey, they were stunned. They knew exactly what was happening. Their favorite scriptural promise was from the prophet Zechariah: “Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). They loved that promise. It was particularly powerful as they walked toward their capital city, where there already was a king, and not a humble and lowly one, but a powerful, brutal king who was allowed to remain in power because he collaborated and cooperated with the Romans. Herod was his name. But on the road, here was Jesus, acting out what everybody immediately recognized, their most precious promise: their own king, the promised Messiah, the Son of God. It was spontaneous: they erupted in joyful exuberance; they tore the cloaks from their backs and stripped branches from the trees, waving, singing, “Blessed is the king, who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

Some Pharisees who are also on this road to Jerusalem, religious officials, good, responsible, prudent men, recognize immediately the danger to him

and to all of them that this outburst represents. So they ask him to do the prudent thing: tell the crowd to stop it. “If these were silent, the stones would shout out,” Jesus says, and the noisy demonstration continues toward the city.

When they proceed over the final hill, the city is there, looming ahead, a sight most had only dreamt of: the walls, the towers, the winding streets, Herod’s grand palace, and the temple, first built by Solomon, rebuilt carefully after the exile: the house of God, the dwelling place of the Holy One, the place where pilgrims made sacrifices and offerings and heard for themselves the blessed words of absolution and forgiveness and redemption and salvation.

He stopped to look as they all did at that point. He wept: the sight brought tears to many eyes. Jesus wept because he knew there could only be tragedy ahead as his people tried bravely to live out their faith in autonomy and freedom under the yoke of a brutal imperial occupation. Forty years later, his people would revolt and, after early victories, would be utterly crushed by the Roman legions, the city leveled, the temple torn down, the population scattered, dispersed, the last remnant driven to the fortress of Masada where, after a long siege, they committed suicide rather than surrender, and it was over.

So he wept, and then he went to the temple and overturned money changers’ tables and drove out the sacrificial animal salesmen. It was the second deliberate, provocative, prophetic act of the day: a direct attack on the opportunistic collaboration of the nation’s leaders with the Romans. It was an immediately recognizable, symbolic act in the tradition of the prophets. Jeremiah, after all, had called the old temple a den of robbers one time and reminded the people that what God really wanted from them was justice, fair treatment for all, kindness, care for the poor and oppressed, the widows and orphans, and peace.

Jesus was not attacking the sacrificial system at all. Sometimes Christians turn what he did at the temple into an act of anti-Judaism. He was not attacking Judaism. He was acting out God’s impatience with religion that forgets what it’s about, religion that ignores the poor and weak and oppressed and focuses on its rituals and rules, a religion that spends its energy and resources on, of all things, who gets to be an officer and who doesn’t instead of tending to the business to which God calls it, namely loving and serving the world.

The leaders, whose leadership depends on cooperation with Rome and therefore whose top priority is preventing incidents like this—the noisy crowd shouting patriotic slogans, the peasant from Galilee starting a riot in

the temple—know exactly what they must do now: get rid of Jesus as quickly as possible.

The people watching all this—the pilgrims from Galilee, the people of Jerusalem who hear the noise, the crowd—are *spellbound*. They have never seen anything like it. They are mesmerized, inspired by Jesus' courage and simple faithfulness. And they become his protectors. The authorities can't touch him because of the crowd, which now follows him everywhere, all week long. When the authorities finally succeed, it will be at night, when the crowd is gone, and he will be followed to the garden where he is praying, arrested and tried that same night, privately, in the walled courtyard of the palace. And the next day, the crowd that screams for his crucifixion in front of the Roman governor is not the crowd that was spellbound, but a small crowd of court followers and opportunists who will do whatever they have to do to preserve their privilege and prerogative and what they assume, wrongly it turns out, is their power (see Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, Chapter 1).

They will be gone soon, all of them, remembered only for their role in his story, which twenty centuries later will continue to leave us spellbound.

What do you make of all this?

Well, for one thing, I think it is difficult to hear the story of Palm Sunday and not understand that what God wants from religion is more than what religion wants to deliver. I think it is impossible to think about the temple incident and not understand that what God expects of religion is not ritual and rules for this and that and strategies for self-preservation masquerading as church growth strategies. I have a hard time hearing the Palm Sunday story and not concluding that God must be weary with his small Presbyterian family fighting over whom to ordain and not to ordain and ignoring its reason for being, which is to love and serve the world in the name of the Lord.

And for another thing, I cannot hear the story of Palm Sunday—the friends of Jesus advising him not to go to the city, to stay in the safety of Galilee, the Pharisees begging him to keep it down, to remain inconspicuous, invisible—I can't hear that without the reminder that religion will always say those things: "Stay out of politics, the public arena. Stay out of the difficult and sometimes controversial issues of the day. Stick to religion: sing hymns, pray, save souls, but do it inside, please—and quietly."

I read an article recently by Bill Moyers on the role of religion in public life. It was a tribute to the late William Sloane Coffin, whose entire ministry was played out in the public and political arena. Moyers, Press Secretary to President Lyndon Johnson, remembered a meeting between the president

and Martin Luther King Jr.. The president was urging King to hold off on his marching in the South to give the president time to neutralize the old guard in Congress and create a consensus for finally ending institutionalized racism in America. King listened, and then he answered, “Mr. President, the gods of the South will never be appeased. They will never have a change of heart. They will never repent of their sins and come to the altar seeking forgiveness. The time is past for consensus, the time has come to break the grip of history and change the course of America.”

“When the discussion was over, Dr. King had carried the day. The President of the United States put a long arm on his shoulder and said, ‘Martin, you go on out there now and make it possible for me to do the right thing.’ Lyndon Johnson had seen the light,” Bill Moyers said. “For him to do the right thing someone had to subpoena the conscience of American and send it marching from the ground up against the citadels of power and privilege” (“Remembering Bill Coffin: The Future of the Prophetic Voice,” *Reflections,* Yale Divinity School, vol. 93, no. 1).

Jesus reminds us today that his business, the business of the church, is not the church but the world. Jesus reminds us today, particularly those of us who love the church, work in and for the church, maintain the church, support the church, that our business is the world God loves and the people of the world God so loves and for whom Jesus Christ died.

Every year, as Lent proceeds to Holy Week and as Jesus enters the capital city, I reread something George MacLeod, Church of Scotland, House of Lords, founder of the Iona Community, said years ago:

> I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as the steeple of the church. Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross, between two thieves, on the town garbage heap, at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his name in Hebrew and Latin and Greek . . . at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died and that is what he died about, and that is where church people ought to be and what church people ought to be about.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus reminds us not only that our church is called to live in and for the city, but so too you and I are called.

From his Nazi prison cell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge, “During the past year or so I’ve come to know and understand more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. I am discovering right up to the moment, that it is only by living completely in the world that one learns to have faith. By ‘this-worldliness’ I mean living unreservedly life’s duties,

problems, successes, failures, perplexities" (*Letters and Papers from Prison)*.

The day ends quietly for him, as it will for us later.

But may we remain spellbound by its compelling power, its terrible beauty, its holiness.

And at some point may we know and experience the reality that as he came from the serene safety of Galilee to the heart of the city, so he comes to each of us, you and me, from the peripheries of our lives, where we sometimes wish he would stay, to our very heart and there seeks entrance, seeks your faithful response and mine, our love, our devotion.

Spellbound they were as they watched him this day. So are we.

> Were the whole realm of nature mine,
> That were a present far too small:
> Love so amazing, so divine,
> Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Amen.